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AUTHOR Sybouts, Ward; Bartling, Don
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ABSTRACT

School consolidation or reorganization continues to be a controversial issue in rural areas, with many contentions and claims about the advantages and disadvantages of small schools at the center of the debate. In fall 1986, a Nebraska survey examined attitudes toward school size and reorganization issues among school board presidents. Respondents were 81 board presidents from K-8 districts and 32 board presidents from K-12 districts that had been reorganized in 1980-85. Both groups felt that local control is an imperative and that the question of reorganization is best resolved with a high level of local involvement. Other respondent opinions differed substantially by type of district (K-8 versus K-12). About 60% of K-12 presidents agreed that tax equity could improve education, whereas 82% of K-8 presidents disagreed. Whereas 70% of K-8 presidents felt that their district was about the right size, 60% of K-12 presidents said their district might be too small. Presidents of K-8 districts were more concerned than K-12 presidents over the possible effect of school closing on community vitality. K-12 presidents rated breadth of the curriculum as their schools' main strength, whereas K-8 presidents pointed to the individual attention their students receive. Educational opportunities were seen as being enhanced through reorganization by 66% of K-12 presidents, whereas 84% of K-8 presidents disagreed. (SV)

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Bureau of Educational Research and Field Services
Department of Educational Administration
University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Nebraska

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RURAL SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS LOOK AT SCHOOL REORGANIZATION

by

Ward Sybouts, Professor
Department of Educational Administration
1204 Seaton Hall
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE. 69588-0638

and

Don Bartling, Superintendent
Leyton Public Schools
Box 97
Dalton, NE. 68131

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RURAL SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS LOOK AT SCHOOL REORGANIZATION

An Abstract

In a recent study of school board presidents in Nebraska, there were some interesting differences found in the way presidents from Class I schools (rural K-8 districts) viewed reorganization as compared to board presidents from recently reorganized districts that offered K-12 education. In some instances, board presidents from K-8 or Class I schools and board presidents from K-12 schools viewed issues in a similar manner. However, in a number of areas the differences in which rural school board presidents saw school reorganization sheds new light on what are seen as concerns or levels of resistance to reorganization.

Summary of Findings

Presidents from both K-8 districts and K-12 districts continue to hold fast to their conviction that local control is an imperative. Both groups feel that the question of reorganization is best resolved with a high level of local involvement.

Approximately 60% of the K-12 presidents agree that tax equity could lead to an improvement in education while 82% of the K-8 respondents disagree.

While approximately 70% of the K-8 board presidents felt their district was about the right size, nearly 60% of the K-12 presidents said their district might be too small.

The presidents from K-8 districts had a higher level of concern over what the affect of losing an attendance center would do to the vitality of their community than was the case of presidents from K-12 districts.

While K-12 presidents said the main strength of the curriculum in their reorganized school was the breadth of the curriculum, the K-8 presidents said the main strength of their programs was the individual attention students received. However, when asked about weaknesses in their programs, K-8 presidents indicated their schools lacked fine arts and school activities, or breadth.

The amount of time students might spend on a bus was of greater concern among K-8 presidents than it was among K-12 respondents.

Educational opportunities for children were seen as being enhanced through reorganization by approximately two-thirds of the K-12 presidents while roughly 84% of the K-8 presidents disagreed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study confirm what is known about a number of the concerns held by rural citizens about the importance of their schools. The findings do, however, show a marked degree of difference in the view expressed by those who come from K-8 districts as compared to board presidents who represented K-12 districts in which reorganization has recently taken place. In districts where reorganization has been completed the concerns associated with consolidation seem to be much less apparent than in the K-8 districts.

Schools are seen as much more than a place where children go to learn. Schools are an identity point for citizens. People in rural areas attach a high level of value to their local school and have non-educational expectations attached to their local attendance unit.

Although the study did not address the issue, it is clear that when reorganization does take place, there must be a definite plan and a concerted effort to ensure the patrons that the quality of the educational program will be improved.

RURAL SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS LOOK AT SCHOOL REORGANIZATION

Introduction

Citizens who live in rural communities, and the board members elected to serve on rural community school boards, have strong feelings of support for their local school. While proponents of plans to improve education, and advocates of school reorganization, often set forth strategies to force consolidation or reorganization based on a rationale that rural school children will have a better educational opportunity and greater tax equity will be achieved, to date in the State of Nebraska reorganization has taken place based primarily by local initiative. Repeated efforts to force or mandate reorganization have been defeated at the legislative level or through the referendum. The discussion over school reorganization continues and many of the contentions and claims regarding advantages and disadvantages for rural schools, and particularly K-8 or Class I schools, remain at the center of the debate.

Among the various arguments that surface when the issue of rural school reorganization is being discussed are the following: rural schools have just as good a program as larger schools; school size is not related to quality; education is a matter best reserved for local control; rural school children receive more individual attention from teachers; the loss of the local school will be a detriment to a community; or reorganization is not going to guarantee a better school experience for children.

In an effort to get a clearer and more accurate understanding of how such issues are seen by school board presidents in rural K-12 districts that have gone through reorganization, as contrasted to the views of rural board presidents (K-8) who have not gone through reorganization, a study was conducted in Nebraska. There were 666 K-8 (Class I) school districts in Nebraska during the 1985-86 school year from which a sample of 200 board presidents was drawn. There were 52 rural K-12 districts which had experienced reorganization from September 1980 through September 1985. The board president from each of the 52 reorganized districts was asked to take part in the study which was conducted in the fall of 1986 by use of a mailed questionnaire. There were 40.5% of the 200 K-8 board presidents

who responded and 61.5% of the board presidents from the 52 recently reorganized districts that answered the questionnaire. Each board president involved in the study was asked for an opinion regarding a number of the issues commonly associated with school reorganization.

Findings

Perceived Strengths and Weakness

Board presidents in K-8 or Class I districts and in the K-12 districts were asked to indicate what they thought were the major strengths and the main weakness of programs in their districts. In the reorganized districts, over one third of the presidents said they felt the main strength was the breadth of the curriculum. Others from K-12 districts referred to curricular or subject area strengths such as mathematics, science, language arts, the college preparatory curriculum or programs for the gifted. By contrast, approximately one third of the board presidents from elementary (K-8) districts said the main strength of their school program was individual attention given students. There were also approximately one third of the K-8 presidents who did not respond to the question. Only one out of ten K-8 board presidents said breadth of the curriculum was a strength in their elementary school district.

The response that was given by some of the K-8 board presidents that individualized attention was a major strength in their school is a contention that may be questioned. Looking at the issue from the perspective of "time-on-task," consideration should be given to the amount of time a teacher can devote to a particular subject. For example, a teacher in a Class I elementary school may easily have one or more students in eight different grades. If the school day extends from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. with a forty-five minute lunch period and two fifteen-minute recesses, this would provide approximately 345 minutes of instructional time during a given day. This instructional time must be divided between the teaching of such basic subjects as reading, arithmetic, social studies, grammar, spelling and science. At some point the teacher would also be responsible for providing some experiences in such subjects as art and music. The elementary teacher would be responsible for courses in eight grades, which would result in forty-eight preparations each day. Consequently, by dividing the time of the teacher with the students at each grade level, there would be approximately seven minutes teaching time for any one subject at any given grade level. By contrast, a teacher in a K-12

district in which there would be sufficient size to have one teacher for each elementary grade, a teacher in the primary grades would have only one arithmetic lesson to prepare and would be able to spend approximately fifty-seven minutes on arithmetic. If similar calculations were made and applied to the amount of time a teacher has for planning for instruction it would be easy to conclude that the teacher in the Class I (K-8) district is working against almost insurmountable odds and at a distinct disadvantage when compared to the teacher who is responsible for only only one grade level. In most K-12 districts an elementary teacher has specialists who provide support for students with special needs or for subject areas such as art or music. In light of these facts, the concept that the elementary teacher can provide more individualization in a K-8 school has to be questioned.

When board presidents were asked to list what they saw as limitations of the curriculum in their district, almost half of those from K-8 districts who answered the question said the areas of fine arts and school activities were areas of weakness. Another 20% of the K-8 board presidents acknowledged that the breadth of the curriculum was a limitation in their elementary school while others (17%) indicated that such items as limited funding, too few students, a need for more time and a lack of competition in the classroom were limitations.

Presidents from K-12 districts reported a different pattern of limitations in their curriculum than their counter parts from K-8 or Class I districts. While approximately 18% of the K-12 board presidents reported that a limited curriculum was the major weakness in their district, none of them indicated the lack of fine arts or school activities were limitations.

The Question of School Size

The perceptions of board presidents in K-8 and K-12 districts about what is an appropriate school size fell into patterns that reflected some interesting differences. About two-fifths of the K-12 board presidents said their district was about the right size and just over 70% of the K-8 presidents took the same position regarding their Class I elementary school district. While almost 60% of the K-12 board presidents said that their district may have been too small, only one-fifth of the elementary presidents felt that way. However, just under one-tenth of the K-8 board presidents said that their district was definitely too small while none of the K-12 presidents felt that way about their district. (see table 1)

Table I

How Rural Nebraska School Board Presidents Perceive the Size of Their Districts

Indicator	K-12 Board Presidents f	%	K-8 Board Presidents f	%
About right	13	40.63	54	70.13
May be too small	19	59.38	16	20.78
Definitely too small	0	0.00	7	9.09

Views on School Expenditures

When asked what they felt about the amount of money spent for educating the children and youth in their respective districts, board presidents from K-12 districts were inclined to suggest a need for spending more money than was the case with K-8 presidents. (see table 2)

Table 2
How Rural School Board Presidents Viewed
School Expenditures

Indicator	K-12 Board Presidents f	%	K-8 Board Presidents f	%
Definitely too much money is spent	1	3.13	2	2.56
We may spend too much money	0	0.00	6	10.26
About the right amount is spent	19	59.38	57	73.08
We should probably spend more	12	37.50	13	16.67
We should definitely spend more	0	0.00	0	0.00

t value = -2.1514 Probability = 0.0158 P<.05

The manner in which K-12 and K-8 school board presidents saw the issue of equalized tax support varied. Neither K-12 nor K-8 board presidents indicated they favored more federal aid to education. The greatest difference in the way board presidents viewed supporting education was in the area of state aid. There were approximately 60% of the K-12 board presidents who favored shifting a greater proportion of the tax burden to the state as contrasted to less than half that proportion of the K-8 presidents who favored such a position. (see Table 3)

Table 3
How Rural School Board Presidents in Nebraska
Viewed the Means of Supporting
Education

Indicator	K-12 Board Presidents f	%	K-8 Board Presidents f	%
Redistribution of local property taxes on an equal basis by the state	5	16.62	17	26.56
Shifting a greater proportion of the tax burden to the state	18	58.25	18	28.12
Have the federal government distribute the money on a nation-wide basis	1	3.12	0	0.00
Combination of the above	4	12.64	14	21.88
Others	3	9.37	15	23.44

Chi-square = 10.9604 Probability = .027 P<.05

Changing School Boundaries

With respect to whom should be responsible for changing local school district boundaries, there was a reflection of strong support for local control revealed in the answers given by presidents from elementary (K-8) districts.

Board presidents from K-8 districts generally felt the State Department of Education and the legislature should stay out of changing school district boundaries and that the issue should be left in the hands of the county reorganization committees or not be considered at all. (see Table 4)

Table 4

How Rural School Board Presidents in Nebraska
View Methods of School Reorganization

Indicator	K-12 Board Presidents f	%	K-8 Board Presidents f	%
Have a state-wide plan developed by the State Department of Education	4	12.50	3	4.00
Have the Nebraska legislature set guidelines and criteria and hold local districts responsible	8	25.00	6	8.00
Let county reorganization committees decide how to reorganize	13	40.63	51	68.00
Others	7	21.87	15	20.00

Chi-square = 10.28 Probability = .0163 P<.05

The Concern Over Time Spent on a Schoolbus

The concern about how much time a child should spend riding a school bus was seen as a more crucial issue by board members of K-8 districts than it was by board presidents from unified K-12 districts. Forty-five minutes on the bus was the maximum amount of time most frequently suggested by K-12 board presidents while K-8 presidents suggested 30 minutes was the maximum amount of time a student should be expected to ride a bus. (see Table 5)

Table 5

How Rural School Board Presidents in Nebraska
View the Maximum Amount of Time a Child
Should Ride a School Bus

Indicator	K-12 Board Presidents f	%	K-8 Board Presidents f	%
15 Minutes	0	0.00	1	1.39
30 Minutes	6	20.69	34	47.22
45 Minutes	13	44.83	14	19.44
60 Minutes	9	31.03	11	15.28
75 Minutes	0	0.00	1	1.39
No Bussing	1	3.45	0	0.00

t value = -3.8529 Probability = 0.0002 P<.05

Perceived Advantages or Disadvantages of School Reorganization

When rural board presidents were asked what they saw as advantages of reorganization, the K-12 board presidents said: a broader curriculum, tax equity and a better educational program. In contrast to this, board presidents from K-8 districts most frequently said: no advantages to be gained, a broader curriculum would be possible, a broader tax base, better extra-curricular (school activities) opportunities and more competition academically.

When asked to give opinions about the disadvantages to be found in reorganization, approximately one-third of the K-12 presidents who answered the question said: loss of local control and another quarter of them said more bussing would be a disadvantage. Among the K-8 board presidents who responded to the question of disadvantages in reorganization there were 44, or 37% of the responses that indicated loss of local control was seen as a disadvantage. Other disadvantages seen by K-8 board presidents included: geographical proximity to school, pupil teacher ratio being too high, higher property taxes and the loss of individualized attention. (School survey data have shown that the pupil-teacher ratios of schools in rural areas remains approximately the same after reorganization as they had been prior to reorganization as small K-12 districts consolidate. For more detailed information see the Sutherland/Hershey School Report, prepared by the State Department of Education and University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1987.)

What Does Reorganization Do to Community Vitality?

There is a concern often expressed that if reorganization were to close a school in a rural community it would be detrimental to the economic and social well-being of the community. To determine how school board presidents looked at this issue the following question was asked: What do you think of the following statement? Reorganization will have a positive affect on business in your community. In districts where there had been school reorganization in recent years a little over one-third of the school board presidents disagreed with the statement. In districts where no reorganization had taken place (K-8) approximately 78% of the presidents disagreed with the statement. These results indicate there is a much greater concern over the impact on community business seen by school board presidents in areas where no reorganization has taken place than there was by people who have experienced school reorganization and seen its impact. (See Table 6)

Table 6

How Rural Nebraska School Board Presidents Responded to the Statement: Reorganization will have a positive affect on business in your community.

Indicator	K-12 Board Presidents f	%	K-8 Board Presidents f	%
Strongly Agree	2	6.25	3	3.70
Agree	5	15.63	9	11.11
No Opinion	13	40.63	6	7.41
Disagree	8	25.00	24	51.85
Strongly Disagree	4	12.50	39	48.15

t value = 3.6088 Probability = .0004 P<.05

How Rural School Board Presidents View Local Control

The loss of local control through school district reorganization is another issue that is often expressed as a major concern of people living in rural communities. Rural school board presidents in K-12 districts and in K-8 districts were asked to respond to the statement: Local control over a public school district is a high priority. Both groups of board presidents, those in K-12 districts and those in K-8 districts, agreed that local control was of high importance. There were, however, no expressions from presidents of K-12 or reorganized districts that they had experienced any significant loss of local control through school reorganization. (See Table 7)

The concern about local control expressed by K-8 elementary board presidents is another area that generates a counter point. In a K-8, or elementary, school district the board is faced with the necessity of sending eighth grade graduates to a near-by school district that has a high school and to pay tuition. The board and the citizens in the contracting elementary school district are required to pay tuition and have no vote in what that amount will

be and they have no elected official to represent them in the affairs of the K-12 district to which they send their children. Consequently, the concept of local control in matters involving high school students is not a reality for people living in K-8 districts.

Table 7

How Rural School Board President in Nebraska Responded to the Statement: Local control over a public school district is a high priority.

Indicator	K-12 Board Presidents f	%	K-8 Board Presidents f	%
Strongly Agree	21	65.63	63	77.78
Agree	11	34.37	17	20.99
No Opinion	0	0.00	0	0.00
Disagree	0	0.00	1	1.23
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00	0	0.00

t value = -0.9188 Probability = 0.1872 P>.05

Reorganization and the Quality of Education

When asked if reorganization would improve the quality of education almost two-thirds of the board presidents in reorganized K-12 districts said they agreed that improvements were experienced. This was in sharp contrast to the view expressed by Class I (K-8) school board presidents. Only an eighth of the K-8 board presidents said they thought reorganization would result in a better quality education while almost 84% felt reorganization would not improve the quality of education. (See Table 8)

Table 8

How Rural School Board Presidents Responded to the Statement: Reorganization will improve educational opportunity for children.

Indicator	K-12 Board Presidents f	%	K-8 Board Presidents f	%
Strongly Agree	9	28.13	5	6.17
Agree	12	37.50	5	6.17
No Opinion	4	12.50	3	3.70
Disagree	6	18.75	25	30.86
Strongly Disagree	1	3.13	43	53.09

t value = 7.6873 Probability = 0.0001 P<.05

The Question of Tax Equity

Rural school board presidents were also asked what their perception was of the following statement: Tax equity will improve educational opportunity for children. Board presidents from elementary districts (K-8) expressed a strong pattern of disagreement with the statement while board presidents from reorganized districts (K-12) were somewhat split in their views. There was a clear difference in the way the two groups saw the issue. (See Table 9)

Table 9

How Rural School Board Members in Nebraska Responded to the Statement: Tax equity will improve educational opportunity for children.

Indicators	K-12 Board Presidents f	%	K-8 Board Presidents f	%
Strongly Agree	8	25.00	2	2.5
Agree	11	34.38	5	6.25
No Opinion	3	9.38	7	8.75
Disagree	8	25.00	15	18.75
Strongly Disagree	2	6.25	51	63.75

t value = 7.6873 Probability = 0.0001 P<.05

Board Presidents View the Threat of Community Decline

Respondents were also asked what there opinion was as to the decline of a community if a local school were lost through reorganization. The school board presidents in recently reorganized districts were not as fearful of the decline of a community through reorganization as were board presidents who represented rural elementary districts (K-8). While 62.51% of the board presidents in recently reorganized districts felt the loss of a local school could lead to the decline of a community, 81.48% of the presidents from K-8 districts saw the decline of a community taking place if school reorganization caused the loss of a school. (See Table 10)

Table 10

How Rural School Board Presidents in Nebraska Responded to the Statement: The loss of a local school will lead to the decline of a community.

Indicator	K-12 Board Presidents f	%	K-8 Board Presidents f	%
Strongly Agree	11	34.38	51	62.96
Agree	9	28.13	15	18.52
No Opinion	3	9.38	4	4.94
Disagree	8	25.00	7	8.64
Strongly Disagree	1	3.13	4	4.94

t value = -2.3704 Probability = 0.0092 P<.05

Conclusions and Implications

Quite obviously, the information compiled in this study verified the supposition that rural school board presidents have strong feelings and concerns about maintaining rural elementary school systems. The findings of this study validated that which has been said regarding concerns of rural citizens about loss of local control, the desire to have a low pupil-teacher ratio and individual attention for students along with concerns that students will be faced with excessive time on busses if they are required to attend a larger school that has gone through reorganization. But in addition the the affirmation and documentation of views of rural elementary school board presidents about reorganization, the findings point to several other conclusions, each of which has some important implications with respect to school reorganization.

First, the findings in this study suggest that the fears or concerns held by board presidents from rural elementary school districts (K-8) are not seen as such critical or major concerns or issues when viewed through the eyes of board presidents in recently reorganized districts. In other words, once reorganization has been completed, school board members no longer perceive concerns or they see them with less intensity or as less crucial than they did prior to reorganization. Many of the fears that rural elementary board members hold for reorganization diminish or do not appear after reorganization.

Secondly, schools are seen as more than a place where children learn to read and write. Rural schools are symbols of a community of interest held by residents residing within a district. The rural elementary school is often viewed as a community center and an agency that provides an identity with which citizens associate themselves. Consequently the rural elementary school serves children and adults in ways that extend or exceed the actual school curriculum and the stated purpose or even the legal mission of the school. In light of the ownership and perceived advantages of maintaining an elementary school district in a rural setting, it is important for those involved with school reorganization to be aware of such feelings and needs and to accommodate these feeling and needs in locales where reorganization is being considered. In as much as a rural elementary school is perceived as something of value, and to which there may even be strong tradition or emotional ties, it is imperative that the constituents of such a school not be deprived of that which they see as highly valued without careful consideration and attention being given to providing value for value through reorganization.

Reorganization must result in improved educational opportunities for students. Parents have every right to expect their children will benefit educationally if reorganization is to take place. Consequently, it is imperative that a definite plan be developed, implemented and evaluated to assure that reorganization will provide a better curriculum, instructional resources, a positive learning climate and the best quality of instruction that is possible. The improvement of the educational program will not be an

automatic outcome of reorganization. It will take more than simply moving larger numbers of students together through reorganization to insure that the quality of instruction will be enhanced. Accompanying plans for improving the quality of education in reorganized districts there should be a system established for assuring accountability. Criteria should be developed that can be used in the assessment of outcomes that reflect not only processes but product outcomes involving achievement, attitudes, and self-concepts that are of a positive nature. There should also be established a plan for determining how parents feel about the quality of education their child is receiving. If schools are perceived by patrons as meeting needs that go beyond the teaching of subject matter, then the school should be evaluated in light of those functions that reach into the affective domain of communities. If patrons value their rural elementary school they should, once reorganization has been completed, value that which has been put in place of their rural elementary school.